



A Right to the City in the Global South?

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The idea of the right to the city has been the subject of strongly renewed interest in academic milieux, activist circles and among public stakeholders. This idea, far from the definition established by Henri Lefebvre, is today at the heart of the debate on the construction of more just urban societies. This debate is well under way in the Global North – but what about the Global South?

The idea of the right to the city, formulated almost 50 years ago, is one that is highly mobilised today, although it does not embody quite the same meanings as those constructed by the sociologist Henri Lefebvre's 1968 work *Le Droit à la ville*. The current popularity of this notion appears to be related to a broadly shared representation whereby the city is considered to be the preferred location and scale for building a more just society. The success of the right to the city is also linked to decentralization and a new division of power between central government and local authorities that support injunctions to citizen participation. These debates seem highly relevant in the Global North. But in the Global South, how do public stakeholders, researchers and social movements seize this concept, interpret it and disseminate it? How can we rethink the notion of the right to the city from the standpoint of these mostly postcolonial spaces?¹

Resurgence and reorientation

The debate on the right to the city was revived in the 2000s with the rediscovery of Lefebvre's works by English-speaking specialists in cities in the Global North (Purcell 2003; Soja 2010; Marcuse 2010) whose perspectives were far removed from those outlined by Lefebvre. This key figure of French sociology embodied a militant Marxist sociology that turned its attention to everyday life, marked, according to Lefebvre, by the arrival of "modernity" in the city under the influence of the market. He denounced the eviction of the working classes from the inner city and the domination of functionalist urban planning that viewed the city as a technical object and deprived city-dwellers of their ability to "produce" urban space by stifling autonomous social practices. For Lefebvre, the city was not a backdrop but a space produced ideologically and politically, and a medium for strategies and struggles.

Some 40 years later, we are now witnessing the advent of the urban society announced by Lefebvre, but the reign of the architect/planner and the technician, of functionalism and zoning, seems to have come to an end (Paquot 2009; Costes 2010). The right to the city now appears as a bulwark against capitalism (Harvey 2003, 2011) and neoliberalism (Künkel and Mayer 2012; Leitner *et al.* 2007). This revisiting of Lefebvre's work therefore accompanies a radical perspective decrying the urban manifestations of capitalism exclusion linked to the control of public space, and

¹ These questions are considered by a research group that we jointly coordinate as part of the DALVAA (Repenser le droit à la ville depuis les villes du Sud. Regards croisés Afrique–Amérique latine – "Rethinking the right to the city from the standpoint of cities of the Global South. A comparative view of Africa and Latin America") research programme, financed by the City of Paris (Émergences, 2014–2018).

urban regeneration, and inviting debate on issues such as the place of minorities in the city, the protection of the urban environment and the various scales of government.

Two central debates: urban citizenship and political mobilisation

The right to the city is linked first of all to the debates on the emergence of a form of urban citizenship – distinct from and independent of national citizenship – that would give access to basic, enumerable rights to be in the city. These include, at the very least, rights in terms of access to housing, employment and mobility. Urban citizenship also goes hand in hand with the right to participate in the various arenas of local political debate. This has led to a relatively dispersed institutionalisation movement that concerns both the Global North and the Global South. Local charters for human rights that emerged in the 1990s were superseded by the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City (2000, Saint-Denis) and the World Charter for the Right to the City, established in 2004 in Quito, Ecuador, following the Social Forum of the Americas. These processes of institutionalisation are supported by UNESCO and UN-Habitat,² who dedicated the World Urban Forum in Rio in 2010 to the theme of the right to the city and subsequently launched its campaign to “bridge the urban divide”.

The affirmation of citizenship at urban level is nevertheless problematic: if all city-dwellers, as part of their local citizenship and their legitimacy as inhabitants, can also express their views about what the right to city should involve, how can their demands be dissociated from the local level? City-dwellers are not necessarily revolutionary individuals or progressives. They “live locally” and struggle to appropriate such an abstract and broad claim and give concrete meaning to it at any scale other than that of their neighborhood. Indeed, what should be considered the “right” scale for structuring this urban citizenship? What types of urban spaces should be considered – peripheral zones or central areas? And how should the specificities of local and national urban histories be taken into consideration?

The sociology of social movements, for its part, calls into question the ability of the slogan (“right to/for the city”) to unite the various emancipatory collectives. For Uitermark *et al.* (2012), the tendency for social movements to align themselves under this banner obscures the meaning of their respective struggles and depoliticises them. According to them, this banner masks the intensity of internal tensions and serves to build the illusion of a united common claim (Kuymulu 2013). This debate is linked to the opposition between a conception of the city as a site and a stake of the class struggle on the one hand, and the idea of a broad “urban” – and not just working-class – social movement on the other. Depriving the right to the city of any reference to the class struggle more generally raises the question of what the new leitmotifs of political emancipation are, beyond the prevailing social and political conformity. Finally, for some, the strength of the slogan pushes the academic analysis too far, to the point of considering that any form of mobilisation in the city constitutes a request for the right to the city, while other authors point out the limitations of a political claim with a spatial or territorial basis (Occupy Wall Street has not destabilised world capitalism, for example).

Positioning and circulating debates in the Global South

These questions are just as pressing in the Global South, where social movements sometimes adopt the right to the city as their slogan. In this context, it forms a framework for restating traditional development goals, which are still very much key issues here: access to urban resources, water, housing, land, urban transport and a liveable environment (Samara 2013). Here, the right to the city is gradually established by the development bodies that participate – from the Global South to a certain extent – in its codification as a category of public action. This institutionalisation

² United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

movement is associated in particular with the “Pink Tide” – the rise to power of the “New Left” – seen in certain Latin American countries and the enactment of progressive constitutional reforms. For example, in 2001, Brazil adopted the “statute of the city”, which redefines the ownership of land and affirms the right to the city (Lopez de Souza 2010) by building upon the proposals of the Movimento Nacional da Reforma Urbana (National Movement for Urban Reform) issued during the drafting of the 1988 Constitution. However, the practical application of these legal measures remains difficult (Fernandes 2007).

This movement currently extends far beyond the Americas. In South Africa, for example, researchers and practitioners specialised in urban issues have been discussing the possibility of formulating fair post-apartheid public policy by specifying urban rights (Parnell and Pieterse 2010). Through these debates, which seek to implement action research, certain countries in positions as regional leaders (such as South Africa and Ghana) are emerging as potential producers of models. The right to the city appears to support processes of domination emanating from those emerging countries (Brazil, South Africa and India in particular) that are able to develop transnational urban development models. The ways these processes spread and the transmission effects between these reappropriations at national level are not yet documented, which leaves many questions about the power strategies relating to the circulation of best practices unanswered.

These countries that “issue” the right to the city are often those in which democratisation and decentralisation are most advanced and where the question of local citizenship is of great importance. This does not mean that the most authoritarian regimes are spared the success of the international rhetoric on the right to the city. In these regimes, where political dissent is heavily repressed, talking about the right to the city perhaps allows for a degree of critical political discourse. In any event, the ideological battles that take place around the stabilisation of the concept at least tell us something about the power dynamics at work in the production of a certain spatial order in these cities.

Urban living conditions and producing the right to the city in the Global South

The urban condition in the Global South features a number of important specificities, which affect the production of the right to the city. Indeed, such production reactivates questions of national, racial and ethnic identity in continents where the question of legitimacy is formulated against a backdrop of decolonisation and a reformulation of divisions constructed during colonisation. Moreover, in the cities of the Global South, residential insecurity is very strong, with widespread precarity and the poor often relegated to the urban periphery. Furthermore, dependence on international aid can modify the situation vis-à-vis land-related issues and the possibility of legislating in favour of the poor in the name of the right to the city. Lastly, rates of urban transformation are often very fast in these cities: populations are highly mobile and the turnover of inhabitants in certain neighbourhoods can be very high even before we consider the impact of strategies that seek to increase territorial ties. This raises the question of urban memories, of temporal depth in the construction of urban legitimacy, and of the ability to create a community spirit in order to claim a right to the city.

Finally, beyond an illusion of unity regarding these struggles, the extent of social inequalities – more marked in the Global South than the Global North – and the specificities of various national political trajectories concerning promises of access to consumerism has led to different interpretations of the right to the city among urban dwellers: in Brazil, *rolezinhos* – gatherings of predominantly poor youths – in shopping malls signal their desire to be assimilated into the middle class and consumerist citizenship, while in South Africa squatters, supported by radical intellectuals who have revisited Lefebvre’s theories (Huchzermeyer 2011), are calling for free access to land and housing.³ Perhaps the cities of the Global South are better placed to reveal the differences of

³ See the website of the Abhlali baseMjondolo Shackdwellers’ Movement South Africa: <http://abahlali.org>.

interpretation and appropriation that exist around a concept that remains, after all, highly polysemous?

Accordingly, in the context of a postcolonial and subaltern turning point,⁴ which rejects a single interpretation of the world in terms of Northern domination of the South, the theoretical scope and significance of research on non-Western cities is confirmed (Choplin 2012). Furthermore, this is an approach that calls for the right to the city to be (re)considered with regard to, and from the standpoint of, the Global South. Indeed, perhaps it is an approach that could lead to a wider reflection on the co-production – by public authorities and city-dwellers alike – of the spatial and territorial standards of what is just and unjust that govern the construction of new categories and references for public action.

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⁴ The field of subaltern studies is a school of thought inspired by Marxism, initially developed by certain Indian intellectuals (Guha, Chakrabarty, Spivak, etc.), that denounces the hegemony of the West and seeks to enable the most marginalised “subaltern” groups to make themselves heard.

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